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Summary of the Reading for Module 1

Farrell, K., Kratzmann, M., McWilliam, S., Robinson, N., Saudners, S., Ticknor, J. & White, K. (2002) identify various critical elements to program evaluation. Their guide entitled “Evaluation Made Very Easy, Accessible and Logical” gives readers and the intended audience of community groups, a step by step guide to evaluation. In addition their work identifies a wide variety of resources including websites and frameworks which can support effective evaluation practice.

Farrell et al. (2002) recognize evaluation as a “political’ process which requires careful planning. The authors define the various forms of evaluation including process, impact and outcome evaluation. They explain the importance of conducting a needs assessment process prior to beginning an evaluation process and briefly describe the core concepts involved. These concepts include identifying gaps, priorities, opportunities/ threats and weaknesses.

The evaluation frameworks/approaches described by Farrell et al. include empowerment, Program Logic Model, the Centre for Disease Control (CDC)Model and the participatory approach. Elements emphasized for their importance in the empowerment framework include the importance of this process being democratic, critically reflective, having the ability to build capacity and self determination as well as the need to involve all stakeholders. According to Farrell et al. the Program Logic Model can be combined with other evaluation frameworks. It is an evaluation tool which visually depicts “bottom-up,” “top down” or “mixed” approaches. The authors outline the benefits and the limitations of using this model. One of the limitations discussed is the initial commitment of large periods of time to carry out this evaluative process. This factor is an important consideration for many community groups and organizations.

The CDC Model for evaluation presented in the guide was specifically developed for the use of public health programs. This model presents evaluation as a cyclical process which revolves around four standards. The standards are utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy. Each standard is defined and an explanation of the step by step process needed to carry out this evaluation is provided. During the gathering of credible evidence step, ethical considerations are given which can prompt users of this evaluation framework to question their moral principles and value systems.

The final evaluation framework presented is participatory evaluation, which in essence is a philosophy where the stakeholder is involved at all levels of the evaluation process. Farrell, K et al. feel this type of evaluation is better suited for use in projects which enhance skills or build capacities of those involved in the project. The authors identify creativity is needed to be able to carry this process through and emphasize the process needs to be directed by group consensus versus one individual making decisions. To close the document, the authors re-enforce the need for dissemination of evaluation findings and leave the reader with many other sources of information for conducting evaluation.

In summary, the authors of “Evaluation Made Very Easy, Accessible and Logical” have developed a “user” friendly abbreviated document which stimulates readers to consider different frameworks or combinations of frameworks for their evaluation methodology. Critical reflection and careful preparation are emphasized. One question raised regarding this document is why so little attention has given to the costs associated with evaluation. Evaluation measures can be costly to organizations in terms of the education of those doing the evaluation and also the time needed to commit to the evaluation. Many organizations today are facing shrinking human resources.

Other questions contemplated is why a document developed within the health sector was chosen as the “spring board” for studying program evaluation versus a document taken from the education sector? Do similar documents exist for use of those involved primarily in education? What are the differences and the similarities between evaluation of programs in health versus programs in education? Stemming from these enquiries, is also the question of whether these evaluation methods are truly embraced and used by the groups for which this document identifies them for?

Responses to Questions

This evaluation document provides me with the opportunity to critically reflect on my past experiences in program evaluation and the political nature of this work. I was involved in a Needs Assessment Committee in the health sector during the time of devolution. The word “needs assessment” was not a favorable term used by employees of the health system to help community members to look critically at the services being provided. Services were being withdrawn from communities who viewed the idea of “needs assessment” as a means to close the hospital and hasten the demise of a small town. Timeliness for conducting an evaluation is an important consideration when embarking on the evaluation trail.

Evaluation is a process which many directors are expected to carry out in addition to many other duties and responsibilities. Many managers today lack human resources, find themselves stuck between administration/ funding bodies with little capacity or support to carry out the process of evaluation effectively. Those in community organizations look to the sectors such as health and education to provide the expertise/guidance needed for evaluation. Evaluation requires consideration of the many “macro” variables such as technological advances which may potentially hinder or accelerate an evaluation process. The question of ethics in evaluation also strikes a “chord” for me. Based on my past experience, community organizations were engaged at the initial onset of program planning for their input, however efforts to provide adequate, timely dissemination of the findings of the evaluation were not emphasized or carried out.

As someone involved in the post secondary education sector, this guide provides useful information for the evaluation of programming taking place in my workplace, namely the mentoring programs for new instructors. After reading the document, I question what elements including in this guide can serve to enhance the discovery of how well the mentoring program is serving the needs for those it was developed for. A survey instrument and open faced forums were used. Potentially, case studies can be used in the evaluation process. A bigger question is how can these frameworks be applied to program evaluation of the nursing program including the potential to engage students prior to course development.

Presently a variety of transitions are taking place in my work environment. As a new faculty member I am not acquainted with all the processes in place regarding program evaluation. I surmise the ability to engage in regular dialogue with others regarding evaluation is very limited; in part due to the lack of faculty, faculty turnover and attention needed to meet the day to day activities of an instructor. In addition, recent sessions on the strategic plan of our organization included announcements on the deficit in budgets, leaving me cautiously pessimistic that staff members will be able to commit the amount of time needed to undertake enhanced program evaluation. The process of evaluation is time consuming and although faculty understand how important this process is, the priority for the day lays in the task at hand, namely the day to day review of teaching materials and attempts to engage students in learning. My task will be to learn more about evaluation processes, advocate for inclusive dialogue on evaluation processes and where possible engage the stakeholders, the students for their feedback and opinions. As well, as a reflective practitioner, I continue to reflect on and critical think about how my capacity for program evaluation is enhanced.

Reference

Farrell, K, Kratzmann, M., McWilliam, S., Robinson, N., Saunders, S., Ticknor, J., & White, K. (2002). *Evaluation made very easy, accessible and logical.* Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health.